

# Example of research paper on the tet offensive during the vietnam war: who won wh...

[Countries](#), [Vietnam](#)



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At the end of January each year many in Vietnam, the USA and other parts of the world, think of 1968 when the Tet Offensive was launched by the North Vietnamese against South Vietnam. Although the North had agreed to a truce they did not honor it. Instead they initiated a surprise attack comprised of approximately 70, 000 Communist fighters into Saigon and about ninety nine other South Vietnamese cities. The attacks took place in cities on the coast and inland causing a shift from rural fighting to urban fighting. The consequences were staggering and the cruelty to innocent people caught in the middle was tragic, even hard to believe. The Vietnam War became even more controversial after the Tet Offensive leading to many discussions and arguments about whether the Americans had won or lost Tet. Below is a description of the historical meaning of Tet to the Vietnamese and known facts about the Tet Offensive in 1968. The reasoning behind the differing opinions about victory are reviewed. Even if the USA and South Vietnam won the Tet Offensive militarily was it still possible to lose the support after the

Tet Offensive for other reasons? If so what reasons could be powerful enough to cause a shift in American opinion? The discussion is based on primary sources, published articles and books.

## **The annual Tet celebration**

Tet is a Vietnamese holiday celebrating the lunar New Year at the end of January. It has been celebrated Tet for thousands of years with “ a sense of happiness, hope and peace.” In peaceful times Tet is a time to slow down and take stock of different aspects in a person’s life. In their book about the Vietnam experience Doyle and Lipsman describe Tet as “ a time for visiting temples with a contrite heart. It is an opportunity for debts to be paid, errors to be acknowledged, and prayers offered up for good health and fortune in the coming year.” Duong Van Mai Elliot, author of a memoir of Vietnam described her great-grandfather honoring the dead and giving special thanks to the family’s guardian angel. She also remembers her Grandmother would only close her business for the two weeks of the Tet celebrations in order to visit temples and meet with relatives. Elliot and her husband were woken the night of January 30, 1968 by gunfire which sounded like it was coming from the American Embassy. They could not go out onto the street to check because there was a curfew in the city.

The next morning we learned that we had heard the Viet Cong attack the embassy. It was hardly the only major target, though certainly the most visible and the most significant in the eyes of the American public and the world. (In Saigon) the Viet Cong had also struck at the presidential palace,

the Joint General Staff and Navy headquarters, the radio station, . . . police posts, and army barracks, among others.

## **USA involvement in Vietnam**

America became involved in Vietnam in October 1945 when the French requested help in efforts to colonize a part of China that is known as Vietnam. Ironically Ho Chi Minh, the leader of a Vietnamese nationalist party striving for independence invoked the American Declaration of Independence and asked the USA for support. The USA continued its military involvement in Vietnam for many decades. By the 1960s policy papers on Vietnam from the Kennedy Presidency (1961-1963) showed that the situation in Vietnam was not good even in the early part of the decade. In fact President John F. Kennedy had considered bringing the troops home. In 1964 President Lyndon B. Johnson was expressing his terrible anxiety over involvement in Vietnam and trying to find people he could trust to help him analyze the situation and decide what steps to take. Some of the conversations with people he looked to for advice were recorded and they reflect a variety of concerns. For example, Chairman Richard Russell, Senate Armed Services Committee, said to LBJ on May 27, 1964 that “ We’re in the quicksand up to our necks, and I just don’t know what the hell to do about it.”

## **Tet Offensive 1968**

Although a truce had been agreed upon for the duration of the Tet celebrations, the North and Viet Cong launched an intense surprise attack that they had been planning for months. Kranow explained that the Viet Cong “ commandos” in charge of attacking Saigon and the U. S. Embassy

located in Saigon were able to start moving weapons into the city as early as three months before Tet. They had this opportunity because “ As a gesture of confidence, the United States had recently transferred full responsibility for the defense of Saigon to the South Vietnamese authorities, whose notions of security were notoriously lax.” In other parts of South Vietnam the Viet Cong killed not only the high government officials in the cities which they had successfully entered but also “ minor government functionaries as well as foreign doctors, school teachers, and missionaries.”

The attack was a great unexpected shock and had many impacts. Gen. Chaisson reported from Saigon that the attacks were “ surprisingly intensive” and “ showed a surprising amount of audacity.” The military intelligence had clearly not been expecting so many coordinated attacks in so many different places especially when the truce had been agreed upon by all powers. From the beginning the war had been fought in the countryside but overnight it was turned a military strategy of urban warfare. The attack on Saigon were well coordinated using small teams from a total about 4000 soldiers placed at different urban locations along the coast and inland. The United States Embassy in Saigon was considered impenetrable but that turned out to be a false and dangerous assumption. The Embassy was targeted and entered; although it was re-secured by American soldiers six and one half hours after the start of the attack. The greatest success of the North may have been holding the Vietnamese sacred city of Hue from January 31 to February 24, 1968.

## **Differing perspectives**

A person known only by the initials ' L. T.' offers some very interesting insight on why the offensive was not as successful as the North and the Viet Cong had planned. L. T. was in Saigon during the middle of the 80s “ after being released from the communist reeducation camp.” The main failure of the Communists (in L. T.'s view) was their inability to launch the attacks with one hundred percent surprise; the reason being that different teams of soldiers initiated their battles on different days. The confusion was from the use of two different calendars each with a different date for the beginning of Tet. The difference in time between the two calendars was 24 hours. North Vietnam adopted a lunar calendar in the summer of 1967 that put Vietnam in the modern division of the 7th time zone. South Vietnam continued to use the traditional calendar which was based on Beijing time which is in the 8th time zone.

It is not as if the information was not available. L. T. explained that announcements were made on Hanoi Radio and NVA prisoners of war also knew about the two different time zones for the two halves of Vietnam. L. T. saw that the loss of soldiers caused a terrible drain on the psychology of the North Vietnamese soldiers. The effect in the U. S. A. was to give strength to the anti-Vietnam protests. The armed forces of South Vietnam were affected in a much different way; they became energized and larger numbers of youths volunteered into the South Vietnamese army instead of waiting for the draft.

The television (T. V.) had become a part of American culture and a T. V. set was in almost every single living room across the country. That meant that

not only were Americans reading about the attacks in their afternoon newspapers but they were able to view what happened on the evening and ten o'clock news. The television evening news with video coverage of the attacks had a greater impact than any of the newspaper reports. Previously the battles had been fought in rural areas. The battles that were covered were reported by print journalists. It was too difficult to travel in rural Vietnam with television cameras or to catch a ride to the front. But the Tet offensive took the fighting into the cities which made for a totally different situation and the opportunity presented itself for filming of the battles and of the results of the battles. For the first time since the beginning of the war viewers saw and heard gun fire and the dead bodies. The television news audiences saw the rubble of ruined city areas and the carnage caused by the fighting.

The Tet offensive gave audience an incredible opportunity to view the military action at the U. S. Embassy. They had a real close-up view as they watched Colonel Jacobsen, a senior official at the embassy when he "shot the last of the enemy commandos as he crept up the stairs" inside the embassy. The television reports from that time on showed a much different war than Americans had perceived. The reports from the government always had a positive spin to them. Until they could see it on their televisions, Americans did not seem to understand the terrible deaths caused by war and its tragic impact on communities. General Westmoreland continued to give optimistic and confident press briefings each afternoon at the U. S. Information Services and the television news announcers consistently reported what he had said. The news announcers were only a voice over the

visuals which showed some of the worst realities of war. Each night as families ate their evening meals the evening news televised a much different war than Americans had been imagining from the newspaper reports. It turned out that soldiers and Vietnam civilians in the war were being injured and killed. Nothing had made Americans understand the horror of war until the Tet offensive and the televised reports.

President Lyndon Johnson was blamed by many for the ‘loss’ of the Tet offensive. In Michal Pearlman’s book review of *Shadows of Vietnam: Lyndon Johnson’s Wars* offers a short and clear description of President Johnson’s overall reasoning from Pearlman’s point of view.

Johnson was committed to war because he feared displaying weakness to an aggressor would encourage future aggression, perhaps leading to World War III. However, he was committed to a limited war because he feared that Vietnam, like Korea, could escalate and bring in a major communist power such as China.

For these reasons Johnson was blamed for losing not only battles but the Vietnam War in general from people including by military commanders in the field and political military advisors in Washington, D. C. The Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Earle G. Wheeler used different strategies on President Johnson in order to force the President to take decisive action. Wheeler thought that decisive action would lead to a clear cut win in Vietnam but he was never successful in meeting his goals such as getting the reserves he wanted called into Vietnam service at the time.

Pearlman states without any qualification that Tet in 1968 was a “tactical success” when reviewing Frank E. Vandiver’s book *Shadows of Vietnam*. A



book written about the North Vietnamese military genius Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap offered the perspective of the North. General Giap did not agree that a Tet offensive should be launched but the majority voting decided to carry it out. Giap was put in charge of planning the attacks. He had learned fighting strategies when fighting against the French, he had been an anti-colonialist. His strategy against the U. S. was to plan for a long battle that with patience would result in victory. He was fully aware of the “ massive firepower, modern technology, and greater mobility” of the American military but he also reasoned that “ the American people would tire of the conflict and its continual drain of manpower and wealth.” After the Tet offensive returned to his previous “ low tech” strategies. Although the Tet offensive was cited as a tactical success it was certainly a failure on the part of the intelligence community. The North Vietnamese were consistently underestimated so that may be one of the reasons so much information about the planned attack was ignored.

The words defeat, loss or failures were not used after the Tet offensive but the doubt was clearly conveyed in many statements. Robert Komer, a National Security Council senior staffer described it with the hint of the surprise so many were feeling at the time “ We genuinely believed we were winning” but “ when Tet turned out the way it did, it was in stark contrast to what the president had been telling the nation.” Eugene McCarthy was running in the Democratic primaries for the presidency at the time and noted that “ We were told that sixty five percent of the population (in South Vietnam) was secure. Now we know that even the American embassy is not secure.”

Huebner a professor of history and literature at Harvard University wrote in the periodical *Journalism History* a balanced analysis of the media and its depiction of the war before and after the Tet offensive. Although others have blamed the media for misrepresentation of the war in fact that the press had “overreacted to the offensive and inaccurately suggested that the Americans were losing” Huebner did not reach the same conclusion stating that “Although *Time* and *Newsweek*, for instance, showed alarming pictures, their text indicated that the Americans had effectively repelled the assault.”

## **Conclusion**

President Johnson was very anxious about the Vietnam War even though the reports he was given were positive. After the Tet offensive the inability of the military intelligence to have uncovered the attacks gave anti-war civilians more ammunition to use against President Johnson. He was blamed for misleading the American people. He lost because he did not run for a second presidential term. Not only had public opinion turned against him, he was not willing to change his Vietnam strategy and use more military force because it might jeopardize the success of his “Great Society” policy for Americans at home.

There is no doubt that the reality of war as viewed on television by American families had a strong effect on the attitude about the war. L. T. felt that it was unfortunate that people were so affected by the media because there was a good chance of winning the war, but not without the support of Americans. Pearlman and others stated that the Tet offensive resulted in a military victory for the Americans. Even though the result of the Tet offensive

was generally considered a military success the new focus on urban fighting changed the views of many Americans. The anti-war protestors were organized and ready to accept people who changed their minds from pro to anti-war. The reality of war seen on home television sets changed many, many minds. This led to the withdrawal of U. S. troops and the fall of South Vietnam to the northern Communists. So the result was definitely a loss of the war and the first domino to fall seems to have happened with the launching of the Tet offensive.

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